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ABSTRACT

According to composition researcher Ken Macrorie, the student research paper violates the pedagogical premise that writing skills are best learned when the writer says something he or she really believes in, for a specific purpose, to a well-defined audience. The problem is not solved by simply telling students that their classmates as well as their teacher will read their papers. It seems natural to provide the students with a rhetorical context that approximates the interactive atmosphere of academic life. In one college composition course, the research paper assignment deals with a question addressed in three assigned essays from a reader. Students write their own research papers with the knowledge that the information they contain will be needed by their group partners for a later assignment, which keeps students interested in helping each other write good papers. As they work through the various stages of their papers, they meet with their groups, and, with the aid of a checklist, give each other suggestions and criticism. Each student then reads the final research papers and uses the information gained as the basis for an in-class essay describing the relationships among the ideas contained in all of the papers written by the members of that group. While the class period is not long enough to read all the papers and write a careful essay, the principles of this method are sound in that students learn that it is natural and desirable to write with a specific purpose and audience in mind, and to receive support and encouragement from the community for which they are writing. (HTH)

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The Research Paper: The Student as Audience

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In Searching Writing Ken Macrorie says,

> Most student research papers in high school are bad jokes partly because they are not subjected to public inspection by a number of people who care about what they say. Instead, they're read by one person only, the teacher, who's thinking principally of how to grade them. In these ridiculous research projects students are trapped on a two-sided loop. Teachers assign them the job to teach them how to use the library and learn scholarly forms of documentation (hoping, usually vainly, that the students will also search for and find something valuable to them and others), and so, the students produce papers no one wants to read. They're inside the loop with the teachers and their interest in form; outside the loop stand human beings who might be interested in the results of a genuine search. Since nobody apparently wants to know what is being said by the writers of these research papers, they say what amounts to nothing. And since their papers contain nothing, the teachers and other people see no reason for reading them for what they say.[1]

According to Macrorie, the research paper is the English teacher's most glaring request for purposeless prose, violating the pedagogical premise (to which most of us subscribe even if we are not always successful in implementing it) that writing skills are best learned when the writer says something he really believes in for a specific purpose to a well-defined audience. Most composition textbooks addressed to teaching the research paper focus on only one aspect of the problem. They

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contain numerous suggestions for helping students choose subjects of interest to them, but few for creating realistic purposes and well-defined audiences for the student research paper. Macrorie, as well as others who emphasize that the writer's relationship to his subject matter is the crucial variable in producing an interesting research paper, imply that the final product will be of interest to the teacher as well as fellow classmates if it is the result of sincere inquiry. I agree that such a paper will most likely be of greater interest to its audience than one written solely for the sake of practicing documentation skills. However, it seems to me that we can do more to assure our students of an interested audience, and correspondingly motivate them to write their papers with their audience in mind during each stage of the process.

When we help our students search for answers to their own questions they learn that writing research papers is a way of learning about something that matters to them and that the process of collecting and synthesizing data is a powerful mode for developing new insights. However, when we focus exclusively on this part of the research process we deemphasize an important message about research: people perform research not only to enhance their own understanding of a particular subject but also to convey this new information to an interested audience.

The problem is not solved by simply telling our students that their classmates as well as their teacher will read their papers. A student might naturally ask, "Why should my peers be

interested in the electoral college system or what its like to be a fireman just because I am interested in these subjects? Why should they care about the causes of delinquency because I have questions I want answers to when I think about this problem?" Lisa Ede says this in another way in her article "On Audience and Composition" when she points out that simply telling students to write to their classmates is not sufficient to prevent them from writing to themselves.[2] Her solution to the problem, as well as the solution for other teachers favoring the "Case Approach," is to create fictitious "out of school" purposes and audiences for research papers. However, since student research papers closely resemble papers written for academic journals, it seems more natural to provide the students with a rhetorical context which approximates the interactive atmosphere of academic life.

Research papers written in the academic world often involve the intended audience in the writing stage as well. We receive comments and criticism from colleagues on our drafts as well as the final version; it is important that this aspect of the process appear in our composition classes. The research paper assignment I developed provides strategies for choosing a subject as well as a method for insuring that the paper will be written for a specific "purpose" and for a well-defined audience needing the information in order to complete their own assignments.

I have used the assignment at La Salle College in a course

titled Effective Writing, which is an elective course offering students the opportunity to continue to practice basic writing skills while learning to write the kinds of papers assigned in college. This course is taken after the student has completed the one required writing course, which, due to time limitations, does not include either the research paper or the literary analysis essay. Effective Writing is designed to fill that gap in their training. I divide the course into four units, one devoted to the critical paper and three concerned with writing the short research paper. The three units for writing research papers are based on groups of related essays in the Little Brown Reader. [3] All of the essays in each section address a common issue.

As part of the research paper assignment the students write a short research paper on a question addressed in the essays. Each student is asked to read several of these papers and write an in-class essay based on them which synthesizes the information they contain. The two-part nature of the process insures that students will write their own research papers with the knowledge that the information they contain will be needed by their classmates for a later assignment. Students necessarily become interested in helping each other write good papers because they know that they will need each other's materials. They know that eventually they will be reading other students' papers, not only for the sake of helping to evaluate them, but because they need the information in these papers to write their in-class essay.

This is how the process worked in one particular semester. At the beginning of each unit the students read several related essays from The Little Brown Reader. For example, from the "Teaching and Learning" section they read "High School and other Forms of Madness" by Pauline Kael, Paul Goodman's essay "A Proposal to Abolish Grading," Paul Robinson's "T.V. Can't Educate" and E. B. White's "Education." We spent one class session discussing the issues found in the essays, including such topics as the advantages and disadvantages of public school, the negative impact of grades, and alternatives to the traditional high school. The students were then asked to write a paragraph describing a personal experience related to the subject of "teaching and learning" which either puzzled them or in some way contained elements that clashed with their values or exceeded their expectations. They were asked to come to class with several questions provoked by the experience described in their paragraph. This technique for arriving at research questions is based on Janice Lauer's suggestions for helping students find and articulate starting points for compositions. Lauer says that "when students identify experiences, issues or ideas that puzzle them, that exceed or fall short of their values, their writing process starts as a personal quest for insight." [4]

When students returned to class they were divided into groups of four for the purpose of choosing questions which relate to each other and collectively explore a subject. For example,, the group which chose to deal with the subject of

grades, wrote papers on the following questions:

1. Should grades be abolished?
2. Are grades important for getting a good job?
3. What are some of the advantages of grading?

Once the group agreed upon a set of questions, chosen from those prepared the night before, each student began his research. They were required to consult at least eight articles and to eventually write a paper of five to seven pages. All of them were aware that they were researching questions which they had generated, and presumably were of interest to them, and to which their entire group needed to know the answers.

As they worked through the various stages of their papers, each written over a period of about two weeks, the students in each of the groups met together and with the aid of checklists which I supplied, gave each other criticism and suggestions. In some cases they were able to exchange information about sources they had found valuable. Often a student was able to use a source that a classmate found useful because they were researching related questions. While reading each other's drafts they were able to comment on the sufficiency of the data in the paper as well as the clarity of presentation because they were knowledgeable about each other's subjects. When they had completed their research papers they brought them to class and copies were distributed to all members of the group. Each student read the research papers written by the group and used

the information gained as the basis for an in-class essay describing the relationships among the ideas contained in all of the papers written by the members of that group.

The assignment was not without its problems. The major difficulties in orchestrating it are associated with the last phase of the unit. It is difficult for students to read several papers during the duration of one fifty minute period and write about them. Because of this problem I did not grade the first two papers written in class. For the third unit I had students read only two of the papers written by fellow students. However, even when limiting the number of papers to just two I discovered that students could do little more then write summaries, rather than comparisons, of ideas common to both papers. One possible solution is to have the copies of the papers distributed a day or two before students write their in-class essay. Alternately, the in-class essay may be regarded as simply a first draft for which the final copy will be completed at home.

I believe that the principles on which this type of assignment are based are sound, although there are problems to be solved in its implementation. Students are given the opportunity to write about a subject of interest to themselves and at the same time provide information needed by their audience, the other students in their group. They know that eventually they will use each other's papers as the basis for a writing assignment. They have good reasons to be interested in each

other's papers and are motivated to help each other during the writing process itself. Furthermore, they are able to do this in a meaningful way since they are knowledgeable about the subject matter of each other's papers. They learn that it is natural and desirable to write with a specific purpose and audience in mind and to receive support and encouragement from the community for which they are writing.

Endnotes

1 Ken Macrorie, Searching Writing (New Jersey: Hayden Book Co, Inc. 1980), p.164.

2 Lisa S. Ede, "On Audience and Composition," College Composition and Communication, 30 (October 1972), p.291.

3 Sylvan Barnet and Marcia Stubbs, The Little Brown Reader (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1980)

4 Janice Lauer, "The Rhetorical Approach: Stages of Writing and Strategies for Writers," Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition, edited by T. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland, (Urbana, Ill. NCTE, 1980), p.56